

Reclaiming Wisconsin's legacy of conservation leadership

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I recently found myself in an end-of-the-workday discussion with a younger colleague about the state of conservation in Wisconsin. In response to recent

political developments, she was exasperated and bewildered. “When I was in college in the ‘90s, we looked to the older generation and wondered what there was left for us to do! They’d done clean water and clean air and endangered species and wilderness. It seemed all that was left was for us to fill in the details. ...Well, I guess there’s more to do.”

There is more to do. There is always more to do.

Every generation stands on the shoulders of those who came before. Every generation provides shoulders for those who follow.

In Wisconsin the time is ripe—the time is now—for a challenge across the generations to reclaim our conservation legacy and to rejuvenate it to meet our new challenges and opportunities.

It is a legacy built by so many.

A legacy built by Charles Van Hise, who stated in 1910 while serving as president of the University of Wisconsin, “The principles of conservation... require for their practice a sense of social responsibility. ...It is by the criterion of what is best for posterity that we should judge the interlocking questions of economics and conservation which confront us.”

A legacy built by Wilhelmina La Budde of Milwaukee, who said in the 1930s, “Conservation is not something to be practiced by certain individuals or by a few groups on rare or more frequent occasions, as the case may be, but it must enter into the very fiber of our daily life and its essence must permeate every civic activity....”

By Aldo Leopold, who wrote in 1947, “Cease being intimidated by the argument that a right action is impossible because it does not yield maximum profits, or that a wrong action is to be condoned because it pays. That philosophy is dead in human relations, and its funeral in land-relations is overdue.”

By Gaylord Nelson, who declared on the first Earth Day in 1970, “Our goal is not just an environment of clean air and water and scenic beauty. The objective is an environment of decency, quality and mutual respect for all other human beings and all other living creatures.”

By Walter Bressette of the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, who asserted in 1994, “One can travel a narrow road and come to view one’s issue as preeminent. But one overriding conclusion in my work is that all struggles are related.”

It is a legacy built not only by those whose names we remember and whose contributions we honor, but Wisconsin citizens over the generations. Acting as individuals and elected officials, and as consumers and landowners. Working in businesses and institutions and organizations and classrooms. Advancing conservation on the land, in the legislature, in print, but above all in the heart.

Although Wisconsin as a state is no longer a conservation leader, we do not lack for leaders. In fact we find creative citizens all across the state who take seriously the responsibilities of stewardship, and act on that conviction. True conservation leadership now resides in all those working to solve problems, meet needs, and seize opportunities. It expresses itself through all those who know that the health of our lands, waters, wildlife, communities, and economies depends on people working together to make constructive change happen.

But to find our way forward, Wisconsin's conservation-minded citizens will need to build new connections across generations, across interests, and across our landscape. We will need to resist the voices of division and special interest and identify our common ground. We will need to look beyond shallow and short-term measures of wealth. We will need to acknowledge that economies can only thrive within thriving ecosystems. We will need to ground our policies in the information that science provides, and the insights that ethics offer. We will need to craft such policies through fair and transparent public processes.

Above all, we will need to encourage one another across generations.

If Wisconsin's conservation legacy is to have a new birth of creativity and commitment, it will have to come from all across the age spectrum.

And so, to the elders

Listen to the next generation. Tell your stories. Share your life lessons and your perspective. Step back, make room, and create opportunity for young leaders. Be a mentor. Provide vision. Bare your heart. Speak your truth.

To the “youngers”

Listen to the elders—and push them. Create your stories. Don't wait for leadership to emerge; you are the leaders. Imagine renewal, make mistakes, and forge on. Find a mentor. Connect to your place. Give your energy. Follow your heart. Speak your truth.

If Wisconsin citizens are to reclaim our mantle of leadership in conservation, it will not do so by going back to some supposed golden age of effective policy and action. No age was so golden as we imagine. We need history also to teach us

about flaws and faultlines in conservation that have long been downplayed or ignored. We will realize our leadership when we take the best of the past and use it to engage our fellow citizens in meeting our ever more complex conservation challenges. We begin by defining boldly a conservation vision that can again connect our knowledge and our spirit, our love for land, and our respect for one another.

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